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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the student role has been overlooked in the educational-change literature. New definitions of student success imply new definitions of what being a student means. The paper argues that research studies and reform initiatives must consciously treat the issue of student-role change as seriously as they have adult-role change. Every change effort requires consideration of the fit between new sets of expectations for students and students' existing views of "the way school is supposed to be." Thus, the goal of improving student results is inextricably linked to how students choose to carry out the role of student. The paper proposes that student-role redefinition is the critical linchpin between adult reform behavior and student success, and that failing to acknowledge and accept this connection is a potentially fatal flaw in promoting understanding of reform and in creating effective change initiatives. One way to alter the organizational and cultural context is through implementing a collaborative image of the relationship between adults and students in schools. (Contains 20 references.) (LMI)

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RESTRUCTURING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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RESTRUCTURING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

A mantra of school reform is "Make a difference for students." The phrase's imperative is well-intentioned: Adults should not forget that schools exist to promote children's learning and that every change should be made with this in mind. Whether a vision of student success drives reform or evolves during it, the practical benefit of having such a clear focus is that scarce resources will flow to support only those activities with the highest probability of helping students.

Those espousing these good intentions will prove to be badly mistaken, however, if they overlook the fact that students must change during reform, not as a consequence of it. New definitions of student success imply new definitions of what being a student means. Discrepancies between how children currently act as students and how they will be expected to act determine the extent to which students will need to be intricately involved in the change process, just as the lack of fit between how adults currently act as policymakers, professionals, or parents and how they will be expected to perform in a reformed system determines the extent to which they must be empowered and supported. Thus, we argue that research studies and reform initiatives must consciously treat the issue of student role change as seriously as they have adult role change.

Student Role Change as the Linchpin in Reform

Every reform effort proposed or underway in this country asserts that students must change in order to be better prepared for entering the "real world." In some cases, the desired differences focus on academic achievement; in other cases, the target is students' attitudes toward themselves, others, and learning; in still others, reformers seek explicit changes in how students act in school -- e.g., cooperatively rather than individually, dynamically rather than passively, responsibly rather than carelessly, reflectively rather than rotely; and, of course, numerous initiatives aspire to some combination of these results.

However, whether the end result sought is achievement, attitude, or action, the reforms all implicate the constellation of expectations that people attach to the role of student. For example, at the risk of oversimplification, there seems to be a relative consensus among reform proposals that to become effective learners occupants of the role of student should "be viewed as active constructors, rather than passive recipients of knowledge....[and] imbued with powers of introspection..." (Brown, 1994:6). "Constructing" and "introspecting" may or may not represent expectations for behavior that students in a particular district, school, or classroom are accustomed to meeting. If these students have traditionally viewed appropriate actions associated with learning as memorizing information or as replicating problem solutions, then an important discrepancy between adults' reform expectations and students' daily enactment of the role must be addressed. As another example, some children -- and more adolescents -- are alienated from the institution of school; they attach no worth to the actions that are expected of them to be "good" students (Nieto, 1994). Neither more stringent standards nor more attractive opportunities to learn are likely to alter their engagement in school until educators and others recognize, accept, and address the circumstances underlying this basic rejection of even being a student in the first place.

The issue we are addressing is not whether students know how to do what they are expected to do, but whether students view what they are expected to do as valuable and appropriate aspects of being who they are. That is, do they accept constructing, introspecting, meeting standards, and taking advantage of opportunities to learn as "regular ways of acting" as students in school (Wilson, 1971:186)? We argue that every single change that touches the classroom requires consideration of the fit between new sets of expectations for students and students' existing views of "the way school is supposed to be." Thus, the goal of improving student results is inextricably entangled with how children choose to carry out the role of student. Students must define themselves as students differently in order to legitimize and validate for themselves the different results expected of them.

This role redefinition is similar to that which adults must undertake as they make reform-instigated transitions to new ways of believing and behaving (e.g., as teacher facilitators, as empowered decisionmakers, as partners, etc.). Yet most of the studies of reform -- and the processes advocated by reform planners -- "backward map" (Elmore, 1980) from desirable student results to how adults should enact new roles that promote those results to how the overall system supports or hinders such changes. They skip entirely the potential or actual necessity for role redefinition on the part of students. Our proposition is that student role redefinition is the critical linchpin between adult reform behavior and student success, and that failing to acknowledge and accept this connection is a potentially fatal flaw in promoting our understanding of reform and in creating effective change initiatives.

Adult and Student Role Change

The change literature offers considerable guidance as to what to look for in the world of adults that affects their receptivity to change. Fullan and Miles (1992:749-752) summarize this body of knowledge succinctly in seven propositions: Change is "learning -- loaded with uncertainty;" "a journey, not a blueprint;" "problem-rich," with the problems viewed as "friends;" "resource-hungry;" power-requiring; "systemic;" and "implemented locally." Therefore, (1) if adults have not had opportunities to establish what the changes mean for them personally, (2) if the changes have not been allowed to evolve over time, (3) if problems associated with the changes and changing are superficially resolved or ignored altogether, (4) if the time, money, and assistance needed to support training and capacity-building are not available, (5) if those having to change do not have the power to manage the change process themselves, (6) if the process does not implicate both the structure and the culture of the school setting, and (7) if outside agencies do not view their role as supportive of local change, then it is unreasonable -- in fact, folly -- to expect adults to substantially alter schools.

Given all that has been learned about changing adults and their systems, it would not be surprising to find that students also vary in the eagerness with which they jump on board the

reform bandwagon; and there are hints that this is in fact the case. Two such glimpses describe this variation nicely. Sidler (1993:9) reported that ninth graders in a school implementing the "school within a school" concept to ease the transition between middle and high school balked at the idea because, as one student complained, "It's like we're little kids." Or, as another one elaborated, "I think lab school is fun, but they should do it on middle school people, not high school; high school is a time for your regular high school days." On the more positive side, Coe, Leopold, Simon, Stowers, and Williams (1994) examined student responses to changes associated with the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990. The students were most aware of increases in group work and the use of portfolios, and generally viewed these developments as improvements in so far as they were "hard" but "more fun." Yet, significantly, "many students noted that the math portfolios required a different sort of work than they had done in math previously...They indicated they were now able to explain what they were doing, rather than 'just come up with the answer'" (Coe et. al., 1994:15).

If student acceptance of change varies just as adult acceptance does, should not Fullan and Miles' seven propositions also apply to students? The answer, of course, is "yes, they should apply." The reality is "no, they have not been." To illustrate, once again at the risk of oversimplification, a typical, reform-minded district might act as follows. Through demand or desire, the district decides that block scheduling is needed at the high school to enable adults to provide the kinds of activities that will better promote "active learning" -- a concept whose meaning has been explored in several different forums, debated at length during planning, and codified in a statement of the district's mission and beliefs. A study group of professionals and citizens convenes to examine the options and to make recommendations to the faculty, administration, and school board. Once a decision to move ahead is reached, the professionals spend a period of time exploring the implications of this change for practice. They visit other schools, they meet, they experiment, and finally alter the curriculum and assessment procedures.

September arrives, and the students suddenly discover that the entire structure and content of their interactions with teachers have been changed. Even if the alterations are impeccably suited to encouraging active learning, the students will still have to redefine how they should behave as students in this new setting. The students have no "grace" period, free from the consequences of grades or promotion, during which they can explore the meaning of these changes for themselves. Change for them does not evolve, it is imposed; and they are held accountable for complying almost immediately. Neither are they in a position to suggest alternative activities or schedules, to have significant resources reallocated to role learning, nor to become formally a part of the management of the process. Were this same scenario applied to changing teachers, the above would be ridiculed as hopelessly "top-down." Of course, from the student's end of the organization, to label any change process as "bottom-up" is a misnomer.

In other words, reform efforts tend to violate every proposition for successful change with respect to students. It should be no wonder that early reports on the effects of reform are not as dramatic as the original goals (e.g., Muncey, 1994; Oakes, 1994; Prestine, 1994; Stringfield, 1994).

Why Has Student Role Change Been Overlooked?

> One way to begin the process of changing school policies and practices is to listen to students' views about them; however, research that focuses on student voices is relatively recent and scarce. For example, student perspectives are for the most part missing in discussions concerning strategies for confronting educational problems. In addition, the voices of students are rarely heard in the debates about school failure and success, and the perspectives of students from disempowered and dominated communities are even more invisible. (Nieto, 1994:396)

If student role redefinition in reform is so critical, why has it not been a prominent focus of reform studies and initiatives? Any number of very practical reasons could be offered:

- The teacher is responsible for guiding students as learners. Because changing how teachers teach will ultimately have the greatest influence on how learners learn, little "upfront" research and reform energy needs to be expended on students.

- Moreover, adult change takes a long time; extending initiatives and research to include an extensive look at students would become temporally unfeasible.

- There are simply too many students, and the costs of involving a proportional number of them in change activities or research samples would be prohibitive.

- Students' have limited experiences in and knowledge about educational institutions, and therefore their contributions are likely to be trivial.

- Students are transients; they get promoted, they move, and they graduate. Thus, it would be difficult to have much continuity in their participation in reform or research over time.

- Researchers and reformers tend to think about students only in terms of the "outcomes" of schooling, and for the most part "making a difference for students" language draws attention to the academic effects of reform on students. This mentality tends to exclude thinking about students as part of the process of change.

- The students' lack of voice can be attributed to their age. Politically, they have no union, professional group, or lobbyists to gain them access to decisionmakers -- no squeaky wheel, no grease.

We suggest, however, that the under-representation of students in research and reform is more substantive than practical and has to do with a mostly unexamined, generalized ascription of subordinate status to the student role. The relegation of students to this status is reflected in the everyday life of schools -- e.g., (1) a heavy emphasis on student compliance with rules; (2) little variance accepted in how the role is enacted; (3) little authority to allocate resources, determine responsibilities, or to confer rewards; and (4) unidirectional communication between adults and students (see Jackson, 1968 and Schlechty, 1975). Adults, in other words, dictate to students the conditions of their participation. The natural fallout of this hegemonic relationship is a silencing of students' thoughts, opinions, and actions in those activities that adults deem important -- like research studies and reform initiatives.

We are not arguing that student role redefinition should take precedence over other changes associated with reform. We do maintain, however, that this event is a legitimate aspect of the process and should be consciously studied and supported along the way. Just as teachers' shedding of subordinate treatment was a critical step in mobilizing the current era of

widespread change, so too is a similar conceptual and actual step necessary to promote dramatic reform with students.

Implications for the Future Direction of Reform

From a control perspective, organizational arrangements such as the four cited above make perfect sense. However, once one views the situation from a change perspective, then such "customary" conditions look considerably misplaced. The unintended consequence of continually being compliant, uniform, deferential, and noncommunicative is that students become passive responders. This is ironic, of course, in that many of the reform movements are trying to make youth more intellectually active. And therein lies the inherent contradiction -- the mixed message -- of reform for students: an ingrained subservience conflicts with constructivist expectations for learning, such as those mentioned earlier in Brown (1994). Or to say it more plainly, traditional expectations for students are incongruent with reform expectations for learners. Such contradictory expectations more than likely will result in a superficial "appearance of active learning" wherein students attempt to construct the meanings they think the teacher expects them to derive from some activity or bits of information. Thus, a challenge emerges for reformers: How can you promote active learning in an historically passive-compliant context?

We feel that reform movements will have to intentionally focus on altering the organizational and cultural context for students during the change process. For example, an undeniable trend in business and government, as well as education, has been to "flatten" the job structure of these organizations. The value resides as much in promoting creativity and commitment as it does in achieving efficiency (Block, 1993). School systems are already incredibly flat -- for adults -- and it is hard to imagine how they could move much more in this direction. But there have to be some ways in which the same organizationally-effective behaviors that "flattening" promotes in adults can be nurtured in children.

Decentralizing decisionmaking has been another popular context-altering way that organizations have attempted to deepen commitment. And, while it is true that a student representative or two is beginning to show up on an occasional school board or strategic planning committee, it is equally true that students no more uniformly learn, feel, behave, or grow than do adminstrators, teachers, parents or community members. Thus, it is difficult to imagine how a few representatives will transfer widespread reconceptions of the role of student to their peers. Still, increasing students' involvement in important decisions might have considerable symbolic, if not substantive, value.

Ultimately, contextual solutions have to be more widely aimed, encompassing much larger numbers of students. Perhaps it would help to realize that students are not subordinate in every situation. For instance, systemic reform does not, or should not, respect status; everyone is implicated. Therefore, when it comes to dealing with challenges to regular ways of acting, there is a basis for more coequal status among students and adults. Both groups face it with reform; both have to address personal and organizational concerns in the process of accomodating, accepting, or rejecting change; and perhaps both could jointly construct what these new roles will look like in classrooms of the future. Therefore, invoking a collaborative image of the relationship between adults and students during reform might be helpful. This image entails the creation of reciprocal relationships wherein all parties (including students) have contributions to make to each other and all have needs that others can meet. The hallmarks of such relationships are equality, fairness, and an "other" orientation which allow for mutual construction of meaning and maximizing the best interests of all. In other words, "scaling up" also includes "scaling down".

Implications for the Future Direction of Research on Reform

Is student role change analogous to adult role change? We are claiming that there is a good conceptual fit between the two, but it is difficult to venture a very sophisticated guess

about what this process really looks like with respect to students. It is important, therefore, to begin thinking about research questions and methods that would help to unravel this issue.

The following thoughts about research issues are more illustrative than comprehensive. Essentially the issues are those that have been traditionally addressed by the change literature, but need to be recast with students in mind. We hope that they offer some concrete examples of the kinds of questions that would be helpful in pursuing this area of research.

One set of issues deals with identifying the types of student responses to change attempts. We know, for example, that adults are expert in pretending that reform is taking place without taking any real ownership in the process, particularly when there are sanctions for not changing (Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988). Are students as adept at giving "the appearance" of reform? That is, do students learn to mimic reform expectations without internalizing them -- i.e., remain other-directed rather than self-directed? And if so, what does "sincere" internalization of new roles sound and look like? Additionally, are there certain potentially effective responses, such as mutual adaptation, that are simply not available to students because of their position in the system? And, how are student responses affected by how large the discrepancy is between current roles and new roles?

A second set of issues concerns differential patterns of role change among students. For example, does reform-necessitated role redefinition provide an opportunity for previously disenfranchised students to find a place for themselves within a school, or do the "good" students prior to reform remain the only "good" students after reform? Or, are there categories of students for whom role redefinition seems to be particularly difficult? The Sidler (1994) study suggests that older students may be more concerned about schools remaining "the way schools are supposed to be" than younger students. Also, we know that teachers are much more productive in contexts where they get assistance and support. Thus, is redefinition easier for students where pockets of reform already exist, possibly because concrete examples of different student roles are visible? In fact, are certain kinds of reforms more conducive to student role redefinition than others?

A third set of issues is more process-oriented. Adult concerns about change range from the personal to the organizational (Hall, 1974). Do students exhibit the same range of concerns, and how satisfactorily must these be met before they are able to constructively consider other matters? Indeed, what do the analogues of effective training, technical assistance, and support for students look like? And who are the significant leaders for them during the process: peers, parents, professionals? Moreover, what are the different ways in which students can become involved in change? Which of these facilitate or hinder role redefinition?

Finally, the unusual arrangement of children and adults working reciprocally would open up a host of relational questions. Does a student-oriented reform process pose a threat to adults' status? What do adults come to value in students and what do students value in adults that enables their relationship to be reciprocal? What are the forms that these reciprocal relationships take? What are the connections between these forms and the historical character of adult-child relationships in the school and community?

With respect to methods, it is true that students have had little "voice" in research on the reform movement. However, the few notable exceptions illustrate that students can be thoughtful, penetrating critics of their educational experiences (McLaughlin, 1994; Nieto, 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Restructuring Collaborative, 1994). A common message across these studies is that, for students, the quality of the human relationships they engage in has a lot to say about the value they attach to their schooling.

> Students told us "the way teachers treat you as a student -- or as a person actually," counted more than any other factor in the school setting in determining their attachment to the school, their commitment to the school's goals and, by extension, the academic future they imagined for themselves. Without a sense of visibility at school, students who weren't attached to conventional academic goals, or who weren't motivated by college competition, too often tuned out or dropped out. One Latina on the verge of dropping out told us, "They didn't really care if you were in the classroom, they didn't care what you were doing. I could have done anything. They had no idea who I was. (McLaughlin, 1994:9)

Because adult-student relationships are so central to both reform and students' views of schooling, methods that can sensitively and credibly capture relational qualities would seem to be particularly valuable. Certainly in the beginning stages of an intensive examination of students and reform, there would be no substitute for talking to students directly, in settings where students can express their experiences freely, and without the constraints of an adult-imposed model of the most significant issues. This would argue for a heavy emphasis on qualitative approaches.

However, regardless of the method, it would be inadequate to solely generate such data to construct better academic explanations of the success or failure of reforms for adult consumption. As Nieto learned (1994:397-398): "Experience confirmed my belief that educators can benefit from hearing students' critical perspectives, which might cause them to modify how they approach curriculum, pedagogy, and other school practices." Thus, to benefit students directly, this formative information should be used to encourage the school community to reflect on the process as it is underway. It may be that talking with students can be a compelling source of feedback to adults because, to a certain extent, adults can expect "to see themselves" in the actions of students. This happens with parents all the time when, for example, they see an older child scolding a younger sibling in a rather nasty tone of voice. The parents' cringe at the brutal interaction, especially as they realize that the older child sounds exactly like they do. So when educators hear students describing memorization rather than reflection -- for example -- as the path to success in school, they must examine their own attitudes, actions, and the activities they have created as contributing factors. Thus, these data-gathering efforts should also pay close attention to new ways of cycling back the student voices so that everyone has a chance to incorporate the information into future improvement actions.

Conclusion

Concerted attempts to influence school administration and instruction have nourished thirty years of intensive and extensive research on educational change. The scope of that research has broadened from individual adult practitioner role change to individual school change to district change to systemic change, as the interconnectedness of all aspects of the educational enterprise has become better understood. Indeed, "scaling up" is decidedly in vogue as a reform focus. Whether it becomes the means to finding a "new way of doing business" to make a difference for students remains to be seen. Our concern that the widening lens of reform tends to ignore students' definitions of their role tempers our hopefulness about the prospects for success. This concern is best exemplified by a story in a children's book.

Dr. Seuss (1962) wrote a wonderful little story about an elephant named Horton who accidentally heard sounds eminating from a dandelion. It turned out that an entire village of "Whos" resided there, but their existence was continually threatened because creatures with a less keen sense of hearing than an elephant's were unaware of this fragile but vital world. The other animals derided Horton's attempts to protect the Whos and tried to destroy the dandelion as his punishment for being foolish. Horton convinced the Whos that their survival depended on their ability to make themselves known. So every Who began to scream, until finally the collective shouting was loud enough to be heard ... ever so faintly, but nevertheless heard. The Whos' efforts, down to the tiniest Who of them all, contributed mightily to their being recognized, but this recognition would not have come about without Horton's ability to listen and willingness to become an advocate for understanding their plight.

A lesson lies therein for those of us who truly wish for research and practice to "make a difference <u>with</u> students."

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